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ABSTRACT

The epideictic genre of rhetoric--the discourse of praise and blame--occupied a major and significant role in the classical era, particularly in classical pedagogy. In fact, approximately three-quarters of the school exercises in writing and speaking were intricately connected to discourse involving praise and blame. Yet today the epideictic genre is lost. Contemporary textbooks give the topic minimal coverage, and authors differ over what forms of epideictic discourse are included in their discussion. In addition, rhetorical theorists and pedagogues offer only exercises that stress the reception of epideictic messages rather than the theoretical underpinnings for actually producing epideictic discourse. Clearly, a practical need exists for students to learn epideictic theory and to master the praxis of such a theory. Exposition and persuasion ultimately rest on value assumptions, and value assumptions are directly addressed in epideictic discourse. Numerous situations and contexts, such as informal and formal recommendations, family funerals, formal toasts, and tributes or dedications, require competence in producing epideictic discourse. Reestablishing the epideictic genre can benefit and enhance the study of rhetoric. (MM)

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EPIDEICTIC REESTABLISHMENT: A GENTLE EXHORTATION

by

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(Presented at the Central States Speech Convention, April 15, 1988, Chicago, Illinois)

I want to thank Bill for inviting me to be a member of this panel. In my following remarks I will not venture to predict the future of Rhetoric. You might ask why not? I assure you that my record of predicting goes far beyond the abysmal! For thirty years I have lost every office pool that I have entered. For more years than I care to mention I have come into the office soaking wet since I cannot predict the weather very well and invariably forget the umbrella. As if these factors were not enough I am unable to predict each month when the checking account will show its invariable negative balance. Consequently, I have absolutely no credentials in the predicting territory at all.

Nor will I lament the directions that rhetorical theory is presently taking. Were I to do so my lamentations and tears would be incredibly fraudulent. In truth, I personally find the direction our field is taking to be exhilarating. For example, the Project on the Rhetoric of Inquiry that imcompasses not only our own discipline but many cognate and allied disciplines as well has all ready produced a number of exciting and provocative scholarly books and articles. That project is exploring what counts for knowledge in the various disciplines and the role of

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rhetoric in such accounting. I have nothing but extreme optimism about the eventual outcome of this enterprise. Yet another example. I think the number of scholars who are now exploring the nature of narrative and narrativety bodes extremely good fortune for our field. And, at the same time scholars are setting their compasses on new directions, I am equally happy with the fine scholarly work being done by our colleagues in the International Society for the History of Rhetoric and in the Rhetoric Society of America. Crossing continents as well as academic departments as well as disciplines these scholars continue to produce definitive work on the history of our field which can only help redirect our efforts in more intelligible and intelligent ways.

Consequently, instead of wildly predicting or crying copiously I will set as my purpose today to urge, ever so gently, that in the future our rhetorical theory reestablish the epideictic genre. Let me repeat. I will set as my purpose to urge, ever so gently, that in the future our rhetorical theory reestablish the epideictic genre.

To develop my exhortation let me review what was, what is, and what should be the status of epideictic in our field.

I. <u>What Was.</u>

As we all know the epideictic genre of Rhetoric occupied a major and significant role in the classical era. One need only review, for example, the <u>Rhetorica ad Alexandrum</u> of Anaximenes or Aristotle's, <u>Rhetoric</u> to easily see the importance of the genre. In addition, one can look at Isocrates', <u>Panygyricus</u> to

see the connection between the theory of epideictic literature and its practice in the hands of a master of the genre. We all have studied the works of Cicero and Quintilian and are familiar, I am confident, with their statements and theorizing on epideictic discourse. Less well known, unfortunately, is the work of Menander and Apthonius who developed the epideictic genre in great detail but, since their works exist in fragments or, at best, in translation, not many of us read their work. Nonetheless, these theorists did add a good bit of understanding to the practice of oratory designed to praise and blame. All I hope to establish by reviewing the roster of the ancient theorists is the claim that epideictic discourse occupied a major and significant role in classical rhetorical theorizing.

Moreover, epideictic discourse occupied a major and significant part of classical pedagogy. The school exercises, better known as the Progymnasmata, served as the sole and primary educational curricula for centuries. M. L. Clarke points out that, "under the Rhetorician, according to Quintilian's scheme, the pupil begins with exercises in historical narrative and proceeds to defending or impugning the credibility of stories, factious or historical. He then goes on to the praise or blame of famous men, comparison between two historical characters, common places and theses and the commendation or denunciation of laws." (p. 121) It is not my purpose in this paper to describe in detail the school curriculum. I realize scholars such as Nadeau, Clarke, and Marrou have adequately done so already. I simply want to point out the impact of epideictic theory on the actual school teaching that went on in the early centuries of our discipline.

If my count is even nearly close to accurate approximately three quarters of the school exercises in writing and speaking were intricately connected to discourse involving praise and blame. When the students, under the guidance of the school masters of rhetoric were involved in the narrative exercises, the chreia, the proverb, the common place, the encomium, the comparison, the impersonation, or the description, epideictic discourse clearly was taught and practiced.

What happened to this rich tradition you might ask?

Chaim Perelman provides the answer when he says:

> The theoriticians of speech, from Aristotle on, readily confused the concept of the beautiful, as the object of the speech (which was, besides, equivalent to the concept of "good") with the aesthetic value of the speech itself. The epideictic genre of oratory does seem to have more connection with literature than with argumentation. One result is that the division into oratorical genres helped to bring about the latter disintegration, as the first two genres were appropriated by philosophy and dialectics, while the third was included in literary prose."

Perelman's observation has been more than amply documented in the scholarship of George Kennedy and Ernst Curtius. In short, the epideictic genre was lost.

II. <u>What is.</u>

Indeed, if we turn to the present we find, unhappily, that

the epideictic genre remains lost. Allen Bloom in his book, The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students, points out, what I believe to be one disastrous effect of the loss of epideictic theory and practice. He points out:

> Families have nothing to give their children in the way of a vision of the world, of high models of action or profound sense of connection with others. The family requires the most delicate mixture of nature and convention, of human and divine, to subsist and perform its function. Its base is merely bodily reproduction, but its purpose is the formation of civilized human beings. In teaching a language and providing names for all things, it transmits an interpretation of the order of the whole of things. ....Parents must have knowledge of what has happened in the past and prescriptions for what ought to be, in order to resist the philistinism or the wickedness of the present. Ritual and ceremony are now often said to be necessary for the family, and they are now lacking. (p. 57)

Personally, I am not certain that the cultural situation is as dire as Bloom indicates but I am convinced that the loss of epideictic theory and practice has resulted in a void, a void with profound implications. Again, turning to Perelman, we find him noting that, "argumentation in epideictic discourse sets out to increase the intensity of adherence to certain values, which

might not be contested when considered on their own but nevertheless not prevail against other values that might come into conflict with them. The speaker tries to establish a sense of communion centered around particular values recognized by the audience, and to this end he uses the whole range of means available to the rhetorician for purposes of amplification and enhancement." (p. 51) In other words, the discourse of praise and blame seems absolutely essential in any reasoned piece of argumentation or persuasion. Yet, we have lost the epideictic fire power we once had in our arsenal.

If, by chance, some of you remain unconvinced that we have lost much connection with the discourse of praise and blame I urge you to spend only a few moments reviewing a few of the textbooks from which our students learn about our discipline. As you reread the best selling textbooks written by Verderber, Monroe, Lucas, or Pearson, and most others, you quite readily observe that minimal coverage of the topic exists. Five to six pages tend to be the norm. You will also discover that formulary and mimetic models take the place of theoretical material. You will discover that the placement in the texts visually suggests the low value placed on epideictic forms of address. In those textbooks that actually talk about epideictic discourse the chapter invariably is the last one in the book. Also, you will find lack of agreement among the authors about what forms of epideictic discourse to include. Some focus on nominating speeches, some on speeches to entertain, some on speeches of acceptances and tribute, some on a speech of dedication. Little if any agreement exists. Then too, you will find that these contemporary rhetori-

cal theorists and pedagogues offer exercises that stress the reception of epideictic messages rather than the theoretical underpinnings for actually producing epideictic discourse. Clearly, we have lost even a fingerhold on epideictic discourse.

III. What Should Be.

We have very quickly looked at what was and what is and now, in the concluding minutes of this paper I would shift your attention to what should be the case.

I believe a practical need exists for students to learn epideictic theory and to master the praxis of such a theory. Exposition and persuasion rest, ultimately, on value assumptions and values are directly addressed in epideictic discourse. In the practical arena, it seems to me, numerous situations and contexts require one to be competent in producing epideictic discourse. I would cite as examples: informal and formal recommendations, family funerals, introductions, accepting honors or awards or gifts, welcomes, tributes, dedications, formal toasts, biographies, etc. We do our discipline and our students a disservice by not better equipping ourselves and our students with the theoretical bases upon which value-laden discourse rests. I would ask, ever so gently, that the best minds in our field turn their attention to a serious reflection and construction of such theories. Doing so, I believe, can only benefit and enhance the important work we do.

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